

The News International  
June 10, 2007

## Katcha Garhi

A hundred beats

By Fatima Bhutto

On the outskirts of Peshawar lies Katcha Garhi, one of the first Afghan refugee camps established in Pakistan. Katcha Garhi, set up months after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, is home to almost 100,000 refugees and is one of the largest camps inside Pakistan. Escaping more than two decades of war, both civil and international, has been no easy feat for the Afghan people. More than one million Afghans were killed, millions more maimed and crippled by carpet bombing operations and landmines (an estimated 15 million of which were planted under Afghan earth), and approximately six million people – one fifth of the pre-war population – were turned into refugees. In the 1980s it was said that one out of every two displaced people in the world was an Afghan.

Roughly four million Afghans came to Pakistan in search of refuge, half of them living in the many camps that were set up along the fringes of our cities. This year, the Pakistan government plans to close four of the largest camps, including Jalozia, Girdi Jungle, and Jungle Pir Alizai, and by doing so encourage the repatriation of 1.5 million Afghan refugees. The residents of Katcha Garhi do not get a full year, they have until next Friday – June 15 – to pack their bags and evacuate their homes. They have five days to return to a land they had left for dead.

Repatriation programmes, initiated by the government and aided by UNHCR, have been underway since 2002. Around 2.8 million refugees have been relocated in the past five years but it hasn't been an easy sell. The government is currently offering \$60 a head (this includes a travel allowance) to repatriate and in many cases, families will take the money and leave Pakistan through one checkpoint only to re-enter through another border point a few months later, resettling in the homes they had pretended to desert. The authorities of Katcha Garhi have since caught on and the camp is now being bulldozed meter by meter to ensure that by next week there will be nothing left to call home, a pre-emptive measure to guarantee permanent repatriation. On May 15 twelve families took their belongings and left Katcha Garhi – their homes were bulldozed hours after they had locked their doors for the last time. This time, there will be no return.

The residents of Katcha Garhi are not new to Pakistan, they are second or third generation refugees. They may not have intended to settle in Pakistan, but every passing year brought only more conflict and warfare to their country, so they stayed. Each house in Katcha Garhi holds approximately 18-20 people. I saw eleven people file out of one cramped house myself. They could not walk side by side in the alleyways outside their home, there was no space. The alleys are three feet wide and lined with rotting garbage and snaking gutters; by any stretch of the imagination, Katcha Garhi cannot look very different from war-torn Afghanistan.

It is a town within a town – there is a school run by refugees that educates girls in the morning and boys in the afternoon, a vegetable market, a UN medical centre, and a local jirga that handles the resident's disputes. The police don't come around here very often. It seems that no one does. As I'm talking to a group of young boys, a man comes up to me and sticks his registration card in my face and starts rattling off in Pushto. He thought I was a UNHCR official and began complaining about his wife's medical problems in rapid fire Pushto, eager not to leave anything out. Even after I explained, through one of the young boys who translated, that I was not a UN employee the man followed me around pointing at his ID card and making pained hand gestures.

Fazle Rehman, one of the boys who vouched for my non-UN status, is a student in the third grade. He is fourteen years old. He was wearing a pair of dark black sunglasses and carrying around his schoolbooks. His father is a daily wager and his mother a housewife. Along with his five sisters and two brothers, Fazle Rehman was born in Katcha Garhi. He's never been to his home in Kabul and says that one day, when things are better, he'd like to return to Afghanistan. I don't have the heart to tell him that he's going to be back sooner than he thinks, much before things are better. As we walk and talk, the man with the ID card interjects, 'there are no facilities here, no security'. It's probably my pen and paper that have blown my cover and I nod and write down whatever he says to me through the translator. I may not be with the UN, but I'm not deaf and what he has to say is troubling, so I listen.

They don't want to leave, not like this he says. Many of them have lost their families in Afghanistan; they don't have anything to return to. He says he has made his home here, in this dusty refugee camp, and that it's here where he earns his livelihood as a labourer in nearby Hayatabad where even the billboards are in Dari Persian.

It's a no-win situation. Pakistan cannot afford to shelter millions of refugees for much longer and Afghanistan is not able to care for its existing citizens, let alone its exiled citizenry. Undoubtedly, Pakistan has been infinitely kinder to its population of Afghan refugees than Iran was. When in Tehran earlier this year, a woman dealing with the UN repatriation project there told me that due to inflation and unemployment it became illegal, literally a crime, to employ an Afghan in the Iranian workforce. In Iran they existed in the underbelly of society, biding their time until it ran out and they were chased out of yet another country. I want to tell the man with the ID card that, I want to tell him that we've tried to be good to him and his family but that in some government office in Islamabad it's been decided that the effort is no longer sustainable. But we tried... I really believe we did try. No one is listening to me, however. I haven't spoken since arriving in the camp, everyone is talking to me and since I can do nothing more than listen, I do just that.

As I'm on my way out of the camp, on my way back to a comfortable house in Peshawar, a young boy sidles up to me and says in English "How are you?" He's nervous, I can tell. Speaking English is a great deal here and all the other children around us are aware of his enviable ability to do so. I tell him that I'm fine and ask his name. He tells me his name is Jahanzeb. A beautiful name. I ask him if he knows what it means and he shakes his head. Someone who loves the world, I tell him and he looks at me unmoved. In retrospect it was a stupid thing to say, to tell a boy living in a refugee camp that his name means someone who loves the world.

I asked Jahanzeb what he wants to be when he grows up and he hesitated in answering me. "What can I be? I can't do anything here in Pakistan". Jahanzeb speaks Farsi, Pushto, Urdu, and English. He is ten years old. I told him he could be anything he wanted.

After thinking for a moment, he said "I'd be a doctor" and smiled.